A Mother's Reflection on Liturgy: Word, Sign, Symbol, Ritual

Our family often vacations on the beach, where we visit with family and enjoy a slower pace of life. It is also a blessing that my mother- and father-in-law live a sand dune away from the ocean. My husband and I regularly take our vacation days at a time when fewer people would choose to be at the beach so that we can enjoy the beach without the crowds. Many years ago, on one such vacation, I found myself on the beach alone with our three sons. The boys were three, four, and six years old at the time. I still smile at the memory.

The morning was unseasonably warm as I sat on the beach watching the boys playing in the sand and the water. The surf provided a cadenced, quiet roar as they ran in and out of the small waves. Holes were dug, small shells collected, and sand fiddlers chased as the morning wore on. The youngest was standing in the water when he unexpectedly found a very large clam shell. He squealed with delight as he lifted the large, rather unattractive shell out of the water. He held it very reverently in his hands and excitedly shared his find with his brothers. The shell, in the small hands of the toddler, made many trips to the surf's edge to be filled with water. The water, carefully carried, was poured slowly and deliberately on many items in the sand. I watched as over and over again my son's little body knelt close to the sand and spoke words I could not hear while he poured the water out onto some miniscule object. On one trip from the water's edge, my son began to walk slowly towards me. He stopped just in front of me, dipped his little fingers in the water, and sprinkled me. He looked at me with a bit of disappointment when I didn't respond. He immediately said, "You are supposed to do this, Mommy," as he blessed himself to show me the way. In the midst of our everyday life, a little child incorporated word, symbol, sign, and ritual from the sacramental life of the Church and made holy all that he encountered.

It seemed so simple that morning as I watched my son—making connections between everyday life and our liturgical life. As a parent and catechist I am always seeking ways to increase people's understanding of our faith in a world that embraces values that often conflict with the message of Jesus Christ. The bishops of the United States emphasize the importance of this aspect of catechetical ministry: "The Church's catechetical mission aims to help the faithful of all ages to grow in both human and Christian maturity, enriching the whole of life with the leaven of the Gospel" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1999], no. 64). That morning on the beach, my son taught me about the profound simplicity of ritual, word, symbol, and sign used in our sacramental celebrations and their connection to our everyday life.

In the Rite of Baptism, we celebrate the beginning of life in faith. Although an infant being baptized is too young to be aware of the event, by the time of Baptism the child has usually already experienced cleansing waters, fragrant ointments, and bright light. I would even be bold enough to say that the infant experiences all of those things at the moment of birth. Yet at the time of Baptism, the child is unaware of the meaning behind the symbols of water, oil, and light. The child lacks an understanding of the words that are spoken and the gestures that are made. The ritual is not noticed by the infant as

something special—it is just another experience of water, oil, and light. But the ritual action, the words, the symbols, and the signs of the sacrament are not lost on those who have gathered to pray with and welcome the child into the faith community. The celebration will be remembered and shared, questions may be asked and answered, and all who were witnesses will be graced with knowing the intimate meaning of the ritual, the words, the symbols, and the signs used during the celebration. Additionally, each time we gather and celebrate, we learn and grow in understanding: we may hear something different, or see something we had forgotten, or recall the scent of the holy oil and know the joy of welcoming a new little one into our community. The bishops remind us that "in the Church's mission of evangelization, catechesis and Liturgy are intimately connected" (USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis* [NDC] [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005], § 33). We gather as a community, celebrating our faith and growing in our understanding of who we are as People of God.

The power of sign, symbol, and word spilled over into my son's life of play. His experience of the liturgy had captured his imagination and found expression in a large, unattractive clam shell and the waters of the beach. For him, the waters of Baptism that he doesn't remember, the welcoming water in the fonts at the doors of the church, and the signing of the cross are not left behind in the church on Sunday. "If [children] are formed by conscious and active participation in the eucharistic sacrifice and meal, they should learn day by day, at home and away from home, to proclaim Christ to others among their family and among their peers, by living the 'faith, that works through love' (Gal 5:6)" (USCCB, *Directory for Masses with Children*, in *Masses with Children*, Liturgy Documentary Series 12 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1996], no. 55). My son was proclaiming Christ to the world—or at least to a little piece of the beach that hot summer day. Aren't we all invited to do the same.

We come from busy lives, full of stress, and we have a responsibility to a liturgical celebration overflowing with commonplace words, symbols, actions, and gestures. It is in the noble simplicity of bread, water, and wine that we are reminded to celebrate the basic goodness of God's gift of love, mercy, and salvation. When we open our hearts like little children, we begin to recognize God beyond the church doors. We recognize Christ present in bread shared with others, in words spoken with respect and words of forgiveness, and in the hand we offer in help and understanding. Slowly our lives experience a change; we begin to see that liturgy flows over into our everyday lives. "Liturgy fosters this ongoing conversion, uniting us in Christ and with one another, uplifting our spirits in thankful, joyful praise, and renewing our hearts in love for God, turning us to love of neighbor" (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, no. 101). Eventually, we hope that we will begin to live our lives as if every day is Sunday, the Lord's Day. We hope to be nourished by Word and Sacrament so that we can go out into our everyday lives and nourish the world. We hope that our actions speak of Christ. We hope for a life that is so immersed in the person of Jesus Christ that we become the word, sign, and symbol of Christ to the world.

Maybe someday we will each be prayerfully present in the world with an unremarkable shell full of water, blessing all that we encounter in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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